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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000142

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: OPPOSITION AND MINORITY PARTIES SEARCH
FOR DIRECTION AFTER LOSING BUDGET VOTE

REF: COLOMBO 186

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Sri Lanka's main opposition and minority parties have resigned themselves to working another year under the SLFP-led government. The opposition and minority parties remain frustrated with the SLFP-led government, but recognize they have few options for replacing the current administration as long as it enjoys the tacit support of the Sinhala-nationalist JVP. Embassy contacts predict that the opposition and minority parties will simply have to wait for the government to falter on its war agenda or the economy before the political climate will change in favor of the opposition. End Summary.

UNP Searching for Answers

¶2. (C) The main opposition United National Party (UNP) continues to search for a coherent strategy to challenge the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led government after its failed attempt to bring down the government last December during the budget vote. UNP contacts note that many in the UNP expected the SLFP-led government to fall in December and were disappointed by the continuation of the status quo. UNP MP Sajith Premadasa (the son of an assassinated former President) told poloff that the UNP would have few options in the future to bring down the government because of the current UNP leadership. Premadasa opined that the UNP was in the theoretical position of being able to win over MPs from the SLFP and many of the UNP crossovers that left the party in 2007 (reftel), but senior UNP leadership consistently picked the wrong UNP leaders to persuade MPs to cross over to the opposition. Premadasa labeled the UNP's inability to challenge the ruling government a "management problem, not a party problem." Alan Keenan, senior analyst with the International Crisis Group (ICG), added that UNP head Ranil Wickremesinghe continued to live up to his reputation for a lack of charisma, hurting the UNP's ability to attract MPs to the opposition.

13. (C) Embassy interlocutors also predicted that the UNP would be unable to use former SLFP leaders disgruntled with the Rajapaksa administration to aid efforts to recruit crossover MPs from the SLFP. Premadasa noted that it was foolish to think that former President and SLFP leader Chandrika Kumaratunga would be able to convince her loyalists within the SLFP to join the opposition. Premadasa said that Kumaratunga had promised to deliver SLFP MPs during the December budget vote, but came up empty-handed in the end. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, executive director of the Center for Policy Alternatives, also noted that former Foreign Minister and SLFP leader Mangala Samaraweera had failed to deliver any further MPs from the SLFP despite his former prominence within the party and current rhetoric against the government.

14. (C) Several Embassy contacts observed that the UNP had little leverage to pull dissident MPs to its side because it could not offer government perks to possible crossovers. As a result, both Premadasa and UNP MP Ravi Karunanayake (possible rivals for the future leadership of the party) agreed that the UNP probably would have to wait till the next budget vote to try again to bring down the government. They said the party would resort to grassroots agitation and street demonstrations as a tactic to help build public support against the government in the coming year.

JVP-UNP Animosity Lingers

15. (C) Embassy interlocutors in the UNP and the Sinhala nationalist JVP told poloff that it would be unlikely that

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the two parties would work together during the coming year to bring down the SLFP-led government. Karunanayake opined that the JVP showed its true colors when it decided to save the SLFP-led government during the budget vote, thereby making it unlikely the two parties could work together in the near future. Premadasa added that JVP contacts had committed to senior UNP leadership that it would vote against the budget, only to reverse course at the last moment.

16. (C) JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva told us that the party had no intention to mount a joint campaign with the UNP in the coming year. Silva opined that even though the JVP had disagreements with the current government on economic policies, it was committed to the government's efforts to defeat terrorism and would not aid any effort to bring down the government that would result in the UNP coming to power. ICG analyst Keenan added that JVP-UNP animosity continues to linger under the surface from the previous UNP administrations, making it unlikely that the two parties could work together even on a limited basis.

Minority Parties Split on Strategy

17. (C) Political parties representing Sri Lanka's minorities have consistently told Embassy that they are frustrated with the policies of the SLFP-led government. Representatives of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) have lamented to pol that the SLFP-led government has turned a deaf ear to their communities' interests. However, the two parties' strategies for dealing with the government differ. CWC Vice-President Ramiah Yogarajan told poloff that the CWC feels that their best strategy remains staying within the government. Yogarajan opined that in 2006, during a brief period out of government, the CWC was unable to get resources for tea-estate workers; staying within the government would at least allow them to get marginal help for their constituents. Yogarajan noted that despite the CWC's desire to stay within the government the SLFP-led government had ignored its constituents so badly that it was prepared to leave the government during the December budget vote. However, the CWC was tipped off at the

last minute that the JVP would not vote to bring down the government, leaving the CWC to reassess its interest and decide to remain with the government.

18. (C) Muslim contacts have noted to Embassy on many occasions that the SLFP-led government has let down their community as well. A.M. Faaiz, Chairman of the Peace Secretariat for Muslims, told Pol that frustration in the

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Muslim community in the East has risen significantly in the past year, especially in relation to disagreements with the GSL over land rights for Muslims. Faaiz and SLMC MP Faizal Cassim noted that historically the SLMC would have chosen to stay with the government as their best strategy to obtain resources for their community, but frustration in the East with SLMC party leaders was so high in December that the party decided to abandon the government during the budget vote. Both Faaiz and Cassim opined that the SLMC's decision to leave the government turned out to be the best strategy. Faaiz noted that SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem is being welcomed with great fanfare when he visits the Eastern province because of the perception that party leaders stood up to the government. Cassim thought that the decision to leave the government has helped unify an SLMC party leadership that was showing signs of fracturing in 2007.

Threshold High For Bringing Down the Government

19. (C) Local think-tank analysts assess that the SLFP-led government most likely would need to experience a dramatic sinking of its fortunes on the war or the economy before it became vulnerable to a meaningful challenge from the UNP.

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The CPA's Saravanamuttu opined that the GSL is banking its entire future on the successful prosecution of its military solution to the war. Saravanamuttu noted that the cash-strapped government could face a backlash from the public if the economy began to deteriorate significantly or if the GSL failed to capture or eliminate any high-value Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) targets. ICG analyst Keenan cautioned, however, that "things would have to get very, very bad" for the opposition to have a chance to gain momentum against the government because of widespread support in the South for the GSL's campaign to weaken the LTTE.

110. (C) COMMENT: It is clear the UNP's options are limited after the failed attempt to bring down the SLFP-led government in December. Without JVP support, the UNP probably will have to rely on grassroots agitation and street protests to mobilize opposition to the government, a move that most likely will only gain traction if the GSL fails to show its southern Sinhalese base that it is making progress in the war against the LTTE, or if its mismanagement results in significant economic reverses. The JVP has little incentive to bring down the SLFP-led government, because it is currently well-positioned to criticize the government while simultaneously allowing the GSL to seek a military solution to the war, its number one priority. Further, our interlocutors continue to believe that the JVP would lose roughly half seats it currently holds if it forced a new election, giving the JVP little reason indeed to ally itself with the UNP. The JVP is in the uncomfortable position of having to justify to its supporters its simultaneous critique of the government and support for the government during the December budget vote, but has weathered this apparent contradiction so far. Separately, minority parties such as the CWC and minor Muslim groupings are likely to support the government in the medium term in exchange for the perks of office and limited benefits for their constituents. Barring major setbacks on the battlefield or the economy, the government is therefore likely to continue in office, even without a stable parliamentary majority, at least until the next budget votes in November/December 2008.

